Information Brief

Positive Youth Development

Positive youth development is the first category for program development and implementation along the Continuum of Programs and Services. It is for <u>all</u> youth (ages 6-21). The underlying assumption of youth development programming is that healthy communities will nurture and support healthy families and individuals. The way to improve the lives of youth is to improve the schools and communities where they live. This represents a substantial conceptual shift from thinking that youth problems are primary barriers to youth development to thinking that youth development is the most effective approach to prevention of youth problems (<u>Positive Youth Development in the United States</u>, 1999). Positive youth development focuses on the strengths and assets of youth, their families, and communities. It views youth holistically and for what they can contribute, rather than for what we do for them.

INTRODUCTION

A youth development approach shifts the focus away from youth problems and categorical youth programs, to a holistic, positive approach fostering the healthy development of all youth. While not ignoring youth problems, youth development focuses on growth and is based on the principle that many youth problems are interrelated and best addressed through comprehensive and proactive strategies that engage youth in positive ways.

> **"Young people's development is a given; the direction it will take, however, is not."**
>
> *- FYSB Update*

POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT – WHAT IS IT?

The Iowa Collaboration for Youth Development* defines youth development as "the ongoing growth process in which all youth strive to: 1) meet the basic personal and social needs to feel cared for and to be safe, valued, useful, and spiritually grounded and 2) build character, skills and competencies that permit functioning and contribution in daily life."

To become socially, emotionally, intellectually and behaviorally healthy and productive adults, youth must develop the attitudes, behaviors, competencies, and skills that allow them to succeed as parents, citizens, and workers. Without these attributes, youth may be at risk for a variety of problem behaviors: violence, teen pregnancy, substance abuse, and dropping out of school.

One of the activities of the Iowa Collaboration for Youth Development has been the creation of an Iowa Youth Development Results Framework. This framework identifies five broad youth-related outcomes that cross system lines and provide a unifying structure for collaboration among youth-serving agencies. The five result areas are:

1) Families are secure and supportive.
2) Communities and schools are safe and supportive.
3) Youth are engaged in and contribute to the community.
4) Youth are healthy and socially competent.
5) Youth are successful in school and prepared for a productive adulthood.

The framework delineates the common results toward which multiple state and local agencies are working.

A MAJOR SHIFT

Youth development represents a major cultural shift in policies and practices. The table below illustrates that shift (*NGA Issue Brief*, July 2000):

Remediation	⟶	Prevention
Targeted Programs	⟶	Universal Programs
Deficit-focused	⟶	Asset-based
Single Problem Solutions	⟶	Holistic, Universal Approach
1-Agency, 1-Discipline	⟶	Interagency/Interdisciplinary

POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

Increasingly, society views youth development as the responsibility of the entire community, including schools. Effective youth development strategies engage youth and their families with schools, the faith community, juvenile justice, child welfare and other youth-serving institutions. Youth development strategies also focus on strengthening the capacity of schools and their communities to better engage and support young people.

Comprehensiveness is an essential characteristic of effective youth development programs. A recent study defined positive youth development programs as those that seek to achieve objectives in one or more of the following areas:

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* *The Iowa Collaboration for Youth Development (ICY) is an interagency initiative designed to align state policies and programs and to encourage collaboration among multiple state and community agencies on youth-related issues.*

- **Competence:** The positive youth development construct of competence covers five (5) areas of youth functioning: social, emotional, intellectual /cognitive, behavioral, and moral. Programs build specific skills in these areas.
  - **Social** – the range of interpersonal skills that help youth integrate feeling, thinking, and actions to achieve specific interpersonal and social goals. Assertiveness, refusal and resistance skills, conflict resolution, and social skills are examples of competencies. Programs that promote social competence seek to strengthen relational skills by providing training, and practice of developmentally appropriate interpersonal skills and their application to specific, relevant situations.
  - **Emotional** – the ability to identify and respond to feelings and emotional reactions in oneself and others. Programs that foster self-awareness, persistence, motivation, impulse control, self-control, and/or empathy promote emotional competence.
  - **Intellectual/Cognitive** – the ability to develop and apply the cognitive processes of self-talk, self-awareness, the reading and interpretation of social cues and the understanding of the perspectives of others, the steps of problem solving and decision-making, understanding behavioral norms, and a positive attitude toward life. Although academic competence is a part of the intellectual/cognitive construct, it is beyond the scope of this document so will not be discussed here. Programs that promote intellectual/cognitive competence include the teaching of logical and analytical thinking, planning, goal-setting, decision-making, problem solving, and self-talk skills.

> **"Problem-free is not fully prepared."**
> *- Pittman, 1991*

  - **Behavioral** – refers to taking effective action. Programs that teach skills and provide reinforcement for effective behavior choices and action patterns, including verbal and non-verbal strategies, can promote behavioral competence. Strategies that reward, recognize, or reinforce students' pro-social behaviors are part of this programming.
  - **Moral** - the ability to assess and respond to the ethical, affective, or social justice dimensions of a situation. Those programs that promote moral competence focus on the development of empathy, respect for rules and standards – cultural and societal, a sense of right and wrong, or a sense of moral or social justice.
- **Bonding:** the emotional attachment and commitment youth make to social relationships in the family, peer group, school, community, and culture that are critical to development of their capacity for motivated behavior and adaptive responses to change and growth into functional adults. Programs promoting bonding focus on developing relationships between youth and healthy adults, positive peers, school and community. Adult and peer mentoring are examples of such programs.
- **Resilience:** an individual's capacity to make healthy and flexible adaptations to change and stressful incidences. Programs that foster resilience build protective factors/assets into the environments of youth.
  - **Spirituality** – Spiritual development lies largely in the domain of the faith community and thus is beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that the literature indicates that religiosity is positively associated with pro-social values and behaviors and negatively related to suicide, substance abuse, premature sexual involvement, and delinquency.
  - **Self-Efficacy** - the perception that one can achieve desired goals through one's own actions. Programs that empower or increase autonomy, or that provide for personal goal-setting, coping and mastery skills, or techniques to change self-deprecation to self-affirmation foster self-efficacy. Efforts made to ensure that students experience personal, social, and academic success contribute greatly to the development of self-efficacy.
  - **Self-Determination:** – the ability to think for oneself and to take action consistent with that thought. Programs intended to increase youth's autonomy, capacity for empowerment, independent thinking, self-advocacy, and/or their ability to live or grow by self-established internal standards and values foster self-determination. Youth leadership/youth involvement programs foster the development of self-determination skills.
  - **Clear and Positive Identity** - the internal organization of a coherent sense of self – by gender, culture and social status. Programs in this area develop cultural competence and facilitate and support a youth's healthy identity formation and achievement, including identity with a social or cultural sub-group.
  - **Belief in the Future** – the internalization of hope and optimism about the future. School-to-work programs, programs that link with institutions of higher education, etc., can influence students' belief in their future potential, goals, options, choices, or long range hopes and plans.

- **Pro-social Involvement:** participation by youth in events and activities across social environments. Programs that provide for pro-social involvement ensure that youth have the opportunity to interact with positively oriented peers and make contribution to others – their family, school, neighborhood, peers, or larger community. Service peers, or larger community. Service learning, volunteering, scouting, and after-school programs are examples.
- **Pro-social Norms:** programs that foster pro-social norms encourage and support youth to adopt healthy, pro-social lifestyles. Such programs provide students with information about commonly accepted behaviors and encourage them to make commitments in the presence of peers or mentors, for example, to attend or stay in school, remain substance-free, identify and seek to achieve personal goals, etc.

SUMMARY

Schools play an important role in the positive development of youth. All children and youth benefit when schools assume this orientation to their work with them. Many youth development programs naturally fit into the daily routines of schools. What better environment to foster healthy social, emotional, intellectual, and behavioral development; to form meaningful relationships with youth that create bonds with positive adults; to provide opportunities for youth leadership and involvement in meaningful roles in the design, delivery, governance and evaluation of programs that impact them; to provide a training and practice ground for the development of pro-social behavior; to engage youth in service to others; and to foster the development of attitudes and skills that enhance youths' sense of self-efficacy, belief in the future, and realization of a clear and positive identity? How easily schools without this orientation can either make no contribution to or unwittingly undermine the healthy development of youth, thereby exacerbating the degree to which they are put at risk.

Much of the literature emphasizes the need for multi-faceted, multi-year programs if lasting behavioral improvements are to be attained. Schools cannot do this job alone. Positive youth development can be accomplished only if it is carried out in collaboration with the youth, themselves, their families, and their communities.

LEARN MORE ABOUT IT:

- **Web sites:**
    - The Iowa Collaboration for Youth Development - http://www.icyd.org/
    - National Youth Development Information Center – http://www.nydic.org/
- **In this Handbook:** See additional briefs in this section on a selection of youth development programs, such as the *Continuum of Program and Services, Mentoring, Youth Involvement, Service-Learning,* and *Conflict Resolution.* For information beyond the scope of this handbook, see the Resources Section.